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ABSTRACT

A study in progress investigating cultural and structural factors which affect educational opportunities for white middle-class and Punjabi immigrants in a California high school is reported. In the two-and one-half years since the project began, researchers have interviewed a broad range of students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The result has been an understanding of the problems encountered by all students. Because of the duration of the study, credibility with school officials and a better climate for educational change have developed. Further credibility and support have resulted from the scope of the project, which addresses the needs of both majority and minority students. For example, an analysis of cultural barriers to academic achievement includes the problems inherent in the self-reliance approach of American parents as well as the close supervision afforded by Punjabi parents. Further, a well-intentioned tracking system contributes to segregation and exacerbates social and academic problems. Educational anthropologists must be aware, however, that for educational change to occur from their recommendations, ongoing collaborative relationships between researchers and school officials must continue long after the initial phase of research is over. (KC)

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EFFECTING EDUCATIONAL CHANGE THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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For the past two and a half years I have had the unusual opportunity of devoting myself full time to a comparative study of school success within a large public high school in northern California. The study examines cultural and structural factors which both facilitate and impede educational opportunities for two groups, the mainstream white middle-class majority, and a substantial minority (12 percent) of Punjabi Skih immigrants. The Project, by design, has been collaborative and applied.

Because little research has been done heretofore on Punjabis in this country, and nothing on their educational performance, it was necessary that we do a great deal of basic community research on the Punjabi population and their adaptation to life in the United States before we could interpret their school performance patterns. The study, which has been largely funded by NIE, was of interest to the Institute because of our analytic framework, which includes both cultural and structural barriers to achievement and suggests how both are mediated by a group's theory of success, and because of our focus on the school adaptation patterns of an immigrant minority group.

The study, which NIE assured me was too large from the start, continued to expand in its scope as fieldwork proceeded. What began as a minority education study has grown to include almost equal attention to the schooling of the majority white group.

Punjabi educators and community leaders noted early in the research their belief that their cultural background, however different it may be from that of the American mainstream, was not the cause of problems which their children experienced in school. The problems, they asserted, stem from the prejudice and discrimination which permeate American society and which prevent their children from receiving equal educational opportunities. We learned, too, that mainstream parents and teachers shied away from cooperating fully with the research so long as they viewed it as "another minority study" with little pay off for their children. The school district itself was probably most sympathetic to the minority focus, because they were under court order to provide better services to Punjabi youth and quite honestly were unsure how to do so.

One of the major strengths of the Project, I believe, is its comprehensive and comparative nature. As so often is the case, we learned as much, or more, about each group, the American mainstream and the Punjabi minority, through the eyes of the other. We also learned more about school success, and barriers to it, through interviewing a broad range of students, parents, teachers, and administrators than would have been the case had we been more narrowly focused. Indeed, I feel certain that an understanding of the majority group experience in school is critical to our understanding of the minority experience. I agree with John Ogbu, moreover, that interpretation of educational outcomes requires analysis of the relationship between schooling

and a group's theory of success.

What I had expected to be able to do today was to share with you actual changes which have occured in our host community and school district, and to show how the research design itself has contributed to the change process. Let me admit that I was unduly optimistic to believe that change would occur so rapidly and that I would have documentation of the results to boot. The reality is that the final report is still in process and that documentable change is still, for the most part, an unrealized project goal.

There are dangers inherent in offering suggestions for change without first having adequate descriptions of the local situation (Ogbu 1979). On the other hand, descriptions, however accurate and insightful, do not in and of themselves lead to educational improvement (Hymes 1972). It has taken three years to reach a point where I feel suggestions for change can be made effectively. By that I mean we have achieved certain necessary preconditions to change. Number one, I feel I now have sufficient understanding of the local situation, backed up by convincing amounts of quantitative and qualitative data, to venture a set of recommendations. Number two, I have credibility with school officials, without which any suggestions could more readily be discounted. Number three, through the process of collaboration, I feel there is a better climate for change than existed three years ago.

In spite of these favorable conditions, if I were to walk away from the research upon completion of the final report, I am

not at all sure what change would occur,

or that its impact would be especially meaningful. I feel quite certain that changes which did occur would remain undocumented, or poorly documented. The role of the anthropologist in the change process itself is what I would like to talk about today.

My concern with using the results of anthropological research to bring about change in educational practice grows out of my fieldwork experience in St. Croix and my previous position with the U.S. Office of Education. When I did my research on ethnicity and schooling in St. Croix my immediate objective, admittedly, was to fulfill requirements for a Ph.D. But I was also commited to doing a study which would have payoff to the host community. My dissertation, in fact, was written with more concern for my St. Croix audience than for my dissertation commmittee. Even though I was back in the States, I made sure my draft was read by local people before it was submitted to the University of Pittsburgh, and, once accepted, I made a point of returning to St. Croix with copies in hand to discuss with and donate to the department of education, the community college, and a host of individuals who had helped with the study. Some of you may have read in my recent article in the Anthropology and Education Quarterly how almost all Crucian boys, the island's native sons, drop out of school before finishing twelfth grade, but that the majority of their sisters remain to graduate. In the process of doing the research I felt confident that I had come to understand a great deal about the

dynamics of education on St. Croix that could benefit local decision makers in improving educational practice, especially for the native sons. However, quite honestly, no one was very much interested. In fact, I could never get the key educators on St. Croix, including the Director of Education, to meet with me, before, during, or after the study. The research had the offical approval of the Commissioner of Education, whose office is in St. Thomas, not St. Croix, but the study never had local support. I was simply an outsider whose presence, along with that of many other Continentals, had to be tolerated. I don't know if those in positions of responsibility have ever read my dissertation and, if they did, whether it proved useful in any way whatsoever.

My St. Croix experience brought to mind former colleagues at the National Center for Educational Research and Development, now NIE, who often cited a fifty year time lag between publication of research findings and their implementation at a local level. Using an industrial model they spoke of developing prototypes, pilot testing, field testing, packaging, and diffusion. They also were drawn to supporting projects, such as curriculum development, whose ultimate products could be clearly identifed. They were little prone to support of efforts dealing with the sociocultural context of education.

Priorities change. In the ten years since I left the Office of Education much more attention, and money, has be given to projects concerned with the relationship between students' cultural backgrounds and their performance in school. Some of the

work has been done by researchers trained in anthropology. Much of it has not. Little of it has resulted in documented change in educational practice leading to improved educational performance. What's more, federal support for such studies has come nearly to a standstill. The government is not sure what it has gotten for its investment. One NIE official recently told me that anything dealing with culture or minorities in now in disfavor. The priority is to shore up competence in reading, writing, and mathematics for all students, mainstream as well as minority.

These priorities, I find, are shared by school officials and parents in Valleyside, the site of my current research. By broadening my research to include nearly equal emphasis on the barriers to educational success for Valleysiders (my name for the white majority) as for Punjabis, my recommendations address the needs of both mainstream and minority. This, I believe, is essential. We, as applied educational anthropologists, need to demonstrate our usefulness to the majority group, if we are also to achieve our objectives related to minority groups. Unlike the St. Croix case, I'm in the welcome situation of having strong support from the superintendent of schools, the high school principal, and other key administrators. The potential utility of my study to the local district is unquestioned, but the actual impact of the research remains problematic if the research process concludes merely with submission of a report to the funding agency and the school district.

The school district agrees that something is amiss with the

structure of the curriculum if 90 percent of the immigrant youth from non-English speaking countries who enter Valleyside schools in fifth grade or later are still limited English speakers throughout high school. They agree that many of the Punjabi students whom they classify as fluent English speakers and whom they have had in the system for twelve years, still have a language problem which impedes their educational progress. They agree that their present tracking system causes too many Punjabi students to graduate from high school with good grades and an inferior education. They agree, what's more, that their present tracking works to the advantage of the small minority of students, largely Valleysiders, blessed with a combination of strong preparation in the basics, above average ability, and, most importantly, the initiative to take advantage of the high school's resources. The majority of Valleysiders no less than minority students, however, receive only minimum benefit from school resources. This is due in part to a community norm which tolerates poor attendance, lack of application to class work or homework, and an acceptance of prejudice against those who are socially and culturally different from the "Quadies," that is, the group of cheerleaders, athletes, and college prep students who are the student leaders. These students, for the most part, pursue a separate and superior academic track. Another instructional track is reserved for the large majority--students who lack goals and initiative, who are too shy to ask for help, who are turned off by school, who have poor skills, whose parents do not know how to be

supportive of the educational goals they espouse, as well as those who feel license to act out their frustrations by picking on the newest underclass at Valleyside High, the Punjabis.

One major factor contributing to this educational picture, we feel, is the mainstream American view of "self reliance." For most Valleysiders self reliance means the ability to go out on one's own. It is toward this goal that parents and teachers are preparing youth. Parents and teachers believe that by their high school years, young people ought to be able to take responsibility for their education. Young people, for their part, insist on doing so. But everybody worries about it. Education at Valleyside High, like education in many public high schools throughout the nation, seems to suffer from a malaise, a vague and worrisome sense that things are not right, without knowing what precisely is wrong. This feeling pervades Valleysider parent and teacher interviews in the present study. Students are pushed on their own, but few are ready to assume full responsibility for their actions, including their performance in school. The result is students doing their own thing, while parents and teachers blame each other, and the students themselves for their lack of attention to formal education.

Punjabi parents, on the other hand, encourage no similar independence among their adolescent children. Teenagers, they feel, must be closely superivsed, and protected, as they are highly impressionable and will wander about wasting time, or worse yet, will get into trouble. Punjabi parents maintain their

authority during these troublesome years. Punjabis parents, moreover, accord equal authority to teachers and other school officials. Punjabi students, for the most part, do what is requested and expected of them. While discouraged from independent decision making, Punjabi youth are given a great deal of responsibility so that by the time they leave school they will be ready to take up their roles as adults, fully able "to stand on their own feet."

At Valleyside High ESL teachers hold Punjabi students in their classes because they wish to protect them from the poor learning environment of the regular classes. While well intentioned, these actions further contribute to segregation and exacerbate the social and academic problems encountered by Punjabi students. Time does not permit me to say more about the specific cultural and structural factors which we have found to influence students' performance. It must suffice to say that our recommendations include a reorganization of the tracking system which we feel will help break down ethnic barriers and reward students for attendance and attention to their studies.

I have proposed to the superintendent of schools in Valleyside a collaborative model for educational improvement. The model is designed to maximize the immediate impact of findings to the local community by permitting me to work with the school district full time for one year, and on a limited scale for four years thereafter, in order to: (1) document changes which occur in the educational programs, or policy, as an outgrowth of the

research; (2) document the process of change itself; (3) serve as a resource person to the school district; and (4) collect longitudinal data on school performance as evidence of the impact of changes in practice and/or policy. The model assumes cost sharing between the school district and a research agency. The school district is very much interested in an ongoing collaborative relationship with me. The major stumbling block of the moment, as you might imagine, is funding.

For anthropologists to be useful to school districts we need more documented evidence of our value to them. We need to learn how to maximize the usefulness of anthropological research to our host communities. This, I feel certain, will require ongoing collaborative relationships between researchers and school districts which continue long after the initial research phase is over. What is needed is a second phase which allows the educational anthropologist to serve as a resource person to the district, while at the same time carrying out, or overseeing, the documentation of the change process itself. Needed, too, is further analysis of the settings and situations which we have identified where cultural discontinuities come into play. At this point I am hopeful that my relationship with the Valleyside School District can continue and that the Valleyside case can be used to provide one model for demonstrating the value of ethnographic research to a local district.